

1935-1980s: The reign of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia

A critical look at the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, regarded by many as progressive, and by some as God incarnate¹

Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia (full title "His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings and Elect of God") has almost universally been remembered as a kindly benefactor, yet the evidence suggesting otherwise is overwhelming.

It is argued that he implemented many reforms in his country and Rastafarians believe him to be God incarnate - as prophesied by Marcus Garvey - but how justified are these suggestions?

If we take as starting point Fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia we find Selassie fleeing to Britain in a brave attempt to rally support for his country. Garvey pointed out that he "ran away from his country to England, leaving his people to be massacred by the Italians" (Marcus Garvey, *The Failure of Haile Selassie as Emperor*, Black Man - London, March/April 1937). He remained in Bath for the duration of the war, but on returning to take his place on the throne he became paranoid about the partisans who had stayed and fought the Italians, fearing their bravery and preferring obsequiousness. Thus, they were gradually removed from positions of authority and replaced with those who had collaborated with the Italians as he knew they could be easily kept in line and would be open to the methods Selassie used to control his dignitaries. Selassie's methods of asserting and achieving and maintaining power involved breeding an atmosphere of distrust and corruption, where government officials would inform on each other in a constant vying for power, each wanting to be noticed and promoted by the Emperor, as the financial rewards could be great.

Ethiopia had much in common with any other capitalist society. For instance, starving peasants felt themselves privileged to even see a rich person in the flesh (shades of the homeless in Britain grieving over a recently deceased Princess). To achieve this state of affairs, Selassie would throw crumbs to the poor and bribe the rich. An example of this was his practice of throwing coppers to the poor to celebrate his birthday each year.

That is why it is preferable for the Abyssinian Negroes and the Negroes of the world to work for the restoration and freedom of the country without the assistance of Haile Selassie, because at best he is but a slave master. The Negroes of the Western World whose forefathers suffered for three hundred years under the terrors of slavery ought to be able to appreciate what freedom means. Surely they cannot feel justified in supporting any system that would hold their brothers in slavery in another country whilst they are enjoying the benefits of freedom elsewhere. The Africans who are free can also appreciate the position of slaves in Abyssinia. What right has the Emperor to keep slaves when all the democratic sections of the world were free, when men had the right to live, to develop, to expand, to enjoy all the benefits of human liberty? (Garvey, 1937)

Always Selassie had to exercise absolute control, punishing those who undermined his authority, two examples being Prince Imru and Tekele Wolda Hawariat. Prince Imru gave some of his lands to the peasantry without the Emperor's permission and as a result he was exiled from Ethiopia for twenty years for "disloyalty". Tekele Hawariat, a celebrated war hero, refused bribes and special privileges and so was imprisoned and finally executed by

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decapitation. If Selassie couldn't have someone in the palm of his hand then he would get rid of them.

Progressive

The image Selassie liked to project to the West was always one of being somehow progressive. To this end many youngsters were sent abroad to be educated, though when they returned Selassie's megalomania and greed meant that this education could never be employed to initiate any reforms in the country. Yet, as we have said, Selassie is remembered by many as a great reformer. Rather than being interested in reform, Selassie was interested in 'development'. This allowed him to appeal for funds to help this process. To this end hospitals, bridges, factories etc. were built, all bearing the name of the emperor. But as the money poured into Ethiopia much of it was misappropriated by Selassie and hundreds of millions of dollars found their way into his personal bank accounts. The West, however, continued to back Selassie, who they

regarded as a bulwark against 'communism' in Africa.

In the sixties, when Selassie had begun to lose his grip following an attempted coup d'etat, he found it necessary to pay Army officers and his Police obscene amounts of money to maintain loyalty and order. Thus, in a country of 30 million farmers and 100,000 police and military personnel, 1% of the state budget was allocated to the farmers and 40% to the army and the police.

Sumptuous Banquets

Selassie bred corruption in Ethiopia; he maintained a backward and inhuman system in which millions of his subjects lived in degrading poverty, oppressive misery and ignorance. Nowhere in the world was the gulf between rich and poor greater. In 1973 Jonathan Dimbleby visited northern Ethiopia and made the film which was to signal the end for Selassie. The film for the first time showed that people were starving to death in their multitudes, despite the money for

'development' which was being pumped into the country. At the Palace the splendour and riches seemed to know no bounds. The juxtapositioning of the two contrasting images in the film was striking; the pigs with their sumptuous banquets were growing fatter on the backs of walking skeletons. Of course this hunger suited Selassie as people could hardly rebel when they were starving to death. There was in fact, however, plenty of grain in Ethiopia. But landowners took the harvest from the peasants, grain prices doubled and the farmers who grew the grain could not afford to buy it.

As the dying continued, western journalists were no longer allowed into Northern Ethiopia.

Selassie preferred to show off his great 'developments' to the world press. The suffering could not be hidden indefinitely so, as the situation became a bigger and bigger embarrassment to the Emperor, the Police began to kill off the starving en masse.

It is ironic that Selassie liked to project an image of himself to the world of a kind, tolerant and benevolent soul, yet those in his country who detracted from this image were usually executed. Supporters of Selassie could argue that it was his underlings and not he that were responsible for the atrocities and corruption, the Emperor being kept in total ignorance of the situation. A look at the facts shows this to be impossible. Selassie knew what he was doing when he stuffed

the money stolen from his subjects under his mattress and encouraged others in his employ to do likewise. Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote of Selassie: "the Emperor himself amassed his great riches. The older he grew, the greater became his greed, his pitiable cupidity...he and his people took millions from the state treasurer and left cemeteries full of people who had died of hunger, cemeteries visible from the windows of the royal palace" (The Emperor (1984) Picador p.160).

When the facts of history are written Haile Selassie of Abyssinia will go down as a great coward who ran away from his country to save his skin and left the millions of his

countrymen to struggle through a terrible war that he brought upon them because of his political ignorance and his racial disloyalty. (Garvey, 1937)

Haile Selassie was not God or a great reformer; but a callous, greedy, thieving autocrat, who should be remembered for the murdering leech that he was.

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